

Lincoln's Failures" - Critiques

DRAWER 4 FAILURES

712009 085 02580



Abraham Lincoln's "Failures"

Critiques

Excerpts from newspapers and other
sources

From the files of the
Lincoln Financial Foundation Collection

EDITORIALS BY THE PEOPLE

THE SO-CALLED "FAILURES" OF LINCOLN.

By Clarence O. Kimball.

In this morning's Messenger (April 12, 1922) appears a sermonette in the editorial columns, "reprinted from Dorways," under the title of "Victory Through Defeats," in which the most commendable conclusion is drawn from the most false of premises. A greater number of errors regarding the life of Abraham Lincoln could scarcely be crowded into the same small place. Briefly they are these:

1. Abraham Lincoln did run for the legislature when he was a young man, very young, but he was not "badly swamped." He had barely turned twenty-three, was a comparatively ignorant frontier youth, and yet in his own precinct, pronouncedly democratic in its sentiments, he, a whig, received 227 out of the 300 votes cast. In his own handwriting he stated that "this was the only time that Abraham was ever defeated on a direct vote of the people. Two years later he was elected and served in the legislature eight years, became speaker, and retired of his own choice. In 1841 when he was only thirty-two, his friends proffered him their support for the governorship of Illinois, but he preferred to go to Washington and declined to run for governor.

2. He "failed" in a country store—a store that he and two partners bought without a cent of money. One of the partners wrecked the business, and Lincoln's high sense of honor caused him to assume debts which he was under no legal obligation to pay (\$1100). The custom of that rude frontier was to pay debts by running away. Lincoln's conduct in this matter was a great element in his making, and cannot be too highly praised, even if the arena was small. There is no moral stain on "Honest Abe." This is anything but failure.

3. Ann Rutledge died and Lincoln mourned. But this is not failure. The Ladies' Home Journal wove a wonderful romance out of this, from which the public will never recover, but Lincoln did.

4. He ran for Congress, but was not "badly" defeated. In fact, he was not defeated at all. In his first race in 1842 Sangamon county instructed for Edward D. Baker, good friend of Lincoln, who was defeated in the

convention by Hardin. Two years later Baker was nominated and elected, and two years after that Lincoln was nominated and elected by the largest majority ever given in the district up to that time, notwithstanding his democratic opponent was the popular Methodist itinerant, Peter Cartwright.

5. Lincoln declined to make any effort for the U. S. Land Office because of his support of a friend for the position. When the appointment of the latter became an impossibility, he applied for the place himself only to defeat an unacceptable candidate. It was then too late, but instead he was offered the governorship of the territory of Oregon, which would soon become a state and would unquestionably return him as its first U. S. Senator, as it did his friend Baker. He declined.

6. It is not true that Lincoln "became a candidate for the U. S. Senate and was badly defeated."

7. He was not a candidate for vice-president in 1856. His famous speech at the Bloomington convention had made him the real leader of the new Republican party in Illinois, and without his knowledge delegates to the national convention in the east voted for him for the vice-presidential nomination to the surprising number of 110, but when he heard of it back in Illinois he remarked that it must have been "that other distinguished Lincoln in Massachusetts" who got the votes.

8. In 1858 he was defeated by Douglas in the famous fight for the senatorship because of a gerrymandering legislature. With the political complexion of the state adverse to him, and despite the overwhelming personal popularity of the "Little Giant," he received a majority of the popular vote. All the moral effects of victory besides were his, and he himself regarded this battle as but a skirmish preceding the decisive conflict of 1860.

At twenty-three Lincoln was a captain in the Black Hawk war. One biographer says: "Master of a profession (surveying) in which he had an abundance of work and earned fair fees, hopeful of being admitted in a few months to the bar, a member of the state assembly with every reason to believe that, if he desired it, his constituency would return him—few men are as far advanced at twenty-six as was Abraham Lincoln."

LINCOLN LORE

Bulletin of the Lincoln National Life Foundation - - - - - Dr. Louis A. Warren, Editor.
Published each week by The Lincoln National Life Insurance Company, of Fort Wayne, Indiana.

No. 264

FORT WAYNE, INDIANA

April 30, 1934

THE TRIUMPHS OF ABRAHAM LINCOLN

Much has been written about the failures of Abraham Lincoln, and many incidents which must have given him considerable personal satisfaction have been interpreted so as to present him in a mood of humiliation. It will be admitted that he often suffered disappointment, but this is not an uncommon experience for those who are ambitious and aim high.

There is a note of despondency in Lincoln's first public speech which biographers have carried down through the years as evidence that he was continually disheartened by humiliating defeats. On March 9, 1832, when he was but twenty-three years of age, he concluded a political address with these words, "If the good people in their wisdom shall see fit to keep me in the background, I have been too familiar with disappointments to be very much chagrined."

Within six weeks after Lincoln drew this rather gloomy picture of his early life, an event occurred which he claimed gave him more pleasure than any other experience up to the time of his election to the presidency. He was elected a captain by a volunteer company in the Black Hawk War. It was this military service which more than any other factor prevented him from making the political canvass in 1832 and resulted in what some may consider a political failure, but which in reality was his first great triumph at the polls.

The fact is that Lincoln succeeded in nearly every activity to which he gave his attention for any period of time. In his primitive occupation as a woodsman none excelled him. As a riverman he became an expert authority on waterways. The accuracy of his work as deputy surveyor has been demonstrated over and over again. In athletic achievements he had few superiors. He became the recognized head of the Illinois bar. His political ambitions were only satisfied when he became President of the United States.

Space will not permit a review of his successes in these various enterprises, but the triumphs which he achieved in the last mentioned effort will illustrate how he moved on from one elevation to another with steady and sure progress, until he was given the highest honor which America has to offer.

1832—A NOVICE SURPRISES THE VETERANS

A resident of Illinois but two years and of Sangamon County but eight months, with but five days to campaign he ran seventh among thirteen candidates for the legislature. He polled all but three of the 281 votes in his own precinct and ran but 159 votes behind Peter Cartwright, one of the successful candidates.

1834—HIS FIRST VICTORY A DECISIVE ONE

Lincoln's showing in 1832 encouraged him to announce for the legislature again in 1834. Of the four successful candidates he polled within fourteen votes as many as the largest number cast for any single candidate. His total vote in 1834 jumped to 1,376. This was a notable achievement for so young a politician.

1836—WHIG FLOOR LEADER OF ILLINOIS

Sangamon County elected seven representatives to the legislature in 1836, and Lincoln led the ticket with 1,716 votes. He was made the Whig floor leader, although but twenty-eight years of age.

1838—MINORITY CHOICE FOR SPEAKER OF HOUSE

Step by step Lincoln gained preeminence among the Whigs of Illinois and was given the complimentary vote as Speaker of the House by the minority party in 1838.

1840—A HARRISON AND TYLER ELECTOR

Supplementing his being elected to the legislature, making four conclusive terms in which he was successful, he was chosen one of the Harrison and Tyler electors. He went back to Kentucky, his native state, for an address, which was possibly his first public address outside of Illinois.

1844—PRESIDENTIAL ELECTOR FOR HENRY CLAY

His political leadership was further recognized by his being made presidential elector for Henry Clay. During this campaign he addressed groups near his old home in Indiana.

1846—THE LONE WHIG CONGRESSMAN FROM ILLINOIS

Elected as a representative from Illinois to the Congress of the United States, he was the only one from the state to represent the Whig party. He made important political speeches in New England at this time.

1854—HIS CONGRESSIONAL TERM VINDICATED

He was again elected to the General Assembly of Illinois which appears to vindicate, as far as his own party is concerned, his term in Congress. He resigned, however, to become the party's candidate for the United States Senate.

1856—RECEIVED LARGE UNSOLICITED VOTE AS VICE PRESIDENTIAL NOMINEE

At the first National Republican Convention in Philadelphia, Lincoln received 110 votes as a candidate for the Vice Presidency of the United States without any effort put forth on his part.

1858—THE PEOPLE'S CHOICE FOR SENATOR

Pitted against the strongest man in the United States Senate, Stephen A. Douglas, he received a larger popular vote than his famous rival, which would indicate he was the people's choice for senator.

1860—THE SIXTEENTH PRESIDENT OF THE UNITED STATES

The popular vote for Lincoln in 1860 was 1,866,452. This total was the largest ever cast for a president up to that time and 511,295 more than was cast for Douglas, the runner-up. The fact that he received a majority of the popular votes in his home precinct at Springfield seemed to give him the most satisfaction of any of the election returns. The elective votes were as follows: Lincoln, 180; Breckinridge, 72; Bell, 37; and Douglas, 12.

1864—HIS ADMINISTRATION CONFIRMED

The election of 1864 was a real test of the popular reaction to his administrative policies, and the overwhelming victory must have been a fitting climax to his political triumphs.

LINCOLN LORE

Bulletin of the Lincoln National Life Foundation - - - - - Dr. Louis A. Warren, Editor
Published each week by The Lincoln National Life Insurance Company, Fort Wayne, Indiana

Number 487

FORT WAYNE, INDIANA

August 8, 1938

LINCOLN'S FAILURES?

Appearing under either the caption "Lincoln's Failures" or the title "Discouraged?", there has been widely distributed a series of statements which imply that Lincoln was continually suffering defeat until at last he finally achieved the presidency. This was good psychology to emphasize during the depression, when so many people were suffering reverses, and now that another season of unfavorable business conditions is upon us the story of Lincoln's failures again find their way into the hands of the people.

After the caption "Discouraged" on this interesting broadside, there is a question mark—sort of a self-analysis reminder. For the purpose of this discussion it might better be placed after the title "Lincoln Failures" with the implication that possibly the experiences of Lincoln were not so humiliating as indicated.

One questions whether or not so much emphasis should be placed on the element of failure which is featured by the compilation of experiences in Lincoln's struggle for advancement. It is very evident that Lincoln himself, did not become depressed by occasional reverses and most certainly his friends and political associates who finally secured his nomination to the presidency did not consider him a good example of a citizen whose life was a long series of failures.

The eight statements quoted in this issue of *Lincoln Lore* are those most usually found on the circulated broadsides, although various versions differ both in the number of failures tabulated and in the emphasis placed on the magnitude of the failure.

1. "When Abraham Lincoln was a young man he ran for the legislature in Illinois and was badly swamped."

Lincoln was but twenty-three years old when he announced himself as a candidate for the Illinois Legislature. He had been in the state but two years and in his home precinct but six months. He was absent from the county in the Black Hawk War during the entire campaign with the exception of a week. Yet, with no opportunities to campaign, he polled 277 votes, or all but three in his own precinct, and with thirteen candidates in the county, four to be elected, he ran in eighth position, just 159 votes behind Peter Cartright, one of the successful candidates. It does not appear that Lincoln was "badly swamped" as his total vote, even in defeat, was greater than the average vote of the entire group of candidates. Two years later he was elected to the legislature and served eight consecutive years. Certainly a summary of his early political experiences does not leave the impression that Lincoln was a failure but a tremendous success.

2. "He next entered business, failed, and spent seventeen years of his life paying up the debts of a worthless partner."

It is true that Lincoln did not succeed as a storekeeper but he sold his interest in the business before it failed. Giving security for friends, buying surveying equipment, and the death of his partner brought on bankruptcy. Obligations which otherwise would not have been his, put him in debt to the extent of about \$500. The statement that he spent "seventeen years of his life" paying this debt is certainly misleading as in the meantime, he married, raised a family, bought a home, and took his place in economic life of Springfield.

3. "He fell in love with a beautiful young woman to whom he became engaged—then she died."

Probably Lincoln was "in love" with Ann Rutledge, she may have been "a beautiful young woman", but there is

no dependable evidence that Lincoln ever "became engaged" to her, as it has been generally accepted that she still considered her engagement to the absent suitor, John McNamar, as binding. About a year after Ann's death, Lincoln proposed marriage to another young lady at New Salem and later on married a brilliant young woman who was often called the belle of Springfield. The story that Lincoln's heart was buried with Ann Rutledge is but another bit of the Herndon legend.

4. "Entering politics he ran for Congress and was badly defeated."

This notation is an interesting reference to a preliminary local rivalry in which three men including Lincoln were hoping to be nominated at a local convention. Lincoln had "entered politics" ten years before and he never "ran for Congress" in 1843 because he was not the party candidate. He was sent from the local convention to the district convention instructed to vote for one of the three men seeking the nomination. This is a typical citation which shows to what effort some one has gone to build up Lincoln's failures.

5. "He then tried to get an appointment to the United States Land Office, but failed."

Upon reviewing the whole story of Lincoln's land office experience, it is evident that in attempting to first secure the position for some one else, he sacrificed an appointment that could easily have been his own if he had gone after it at the beginning. He only failed after he had exhausted his efforts on behalf of another and then tried to rescue the appointment by becoming a candidate himself.

6. "He became a candidate for the United States Senate and was badly defeated."

One conversant with Lincoln's senatorial aspirations in 1854 scarcely could call him a "badly defeated" man. Possibly he was a badly treated man and most certainly sacrificed his personal chances for the sake of the party. Here is Lincoln's own reaction to the balloting: "I began with 44 votes, Shields 41, and Trumbull 5,—yet Trumbull was elected. In fact, 47 different members voted for me,—getting three new ones on the second ballot, and losing four old ones. How came my 47 to yield to Trumbull's 5?"

7. "In 1856, he became a candidate for the vice presidency and was again defeated."

It is inferred from the statement about the use of his name for the vice presidency in 1856 that Lincoln sought the office. The fact is that he had no knowledge that his name would be used and was surprised it had been placed before the convention. He was not even in attendance and there was no opportunity for much organized effort on his behalf, yet with his name merely put in nomination, on the first ballot he received 110 votes over against the 259 cast for Dayton whose campaign for the vice presidency was well executed.

8. "In 1858, he was defeated by Douglas."

This is the one statement in the entire list of eight that would seem to need no comment as it is widely known that the senatorial contest between Lincoln and Douglas in 1858 was won by Douglas. It is not known, generally, however, that Lincoln received a larger popular vote than Douglas and it was only by the voting of the electoral college that Lincoln was defeated. To poll more votes than the outstanding statesman of America of that day should not be counted an ignominious defeat.

Research Regarding Lincoln's Life Gives Honorable Record of Career

No Excuse for Misleading Statements
—Except Ignorance, Says Writer of
This Article.

"When God wants a man for a supreme task He usually picks him from the quiet places."

By PERCY E. GOODRICH.

IT IS indeed difficult to say anything new or unusual about our greatest American. There has, in the last few years, been many false or misleading statements made pertaining to his early life that it is astonishing how little some writers really know of his early life or of his entire life up to the time he became President of our country.

Just last year an article appeared in a magazine of wide circulation, filled with one misstatement after another. From reading this article you inevitably come to the conclusion that the author was grossly ignorant of the subject or deliberately ignored the laborious and painstaking years of research of William Barton, Ida Tarbell, Dr. Lewis Warren, John Hay, Carpenter and a host of other students of Lincoln. He may have drawn his story from Herndon's "Life of Lincoln" which contains much unfriendly criticism of his great law partner. Some Lincoln biographers think it was written to vent his spleen on Mrs. Lincoln, whom he detested, and she had little use for him.

Gross Misstatement.

One gross misstatement was that he had attended school only a few weeks. Lincoln had at least five different teachers in Kentucky and Indiana besides he had the help of Mentor Graham in Illinois, who helped him in the study of grammar until he mastered every rule in English. He put into his hands a number of classical books of both prose and poetry. He was ever a student of the Holy Bible. This cannot be gainsaid when we know that he belonged to no church, but quoted more lines from the Sacred Book in his state papers and recorded addresses than all the presidents combined preceding or following him. This misinformed writer said:

"A YOUNG MAN OF TWENTY-TWO, A PARTNER IN A STORE *** SHERIFF'S SIGN ON THE DOOR *** LOST EVERY PENNY OF SEVEN YEARS' SAVINGS."

Lincoln at 22 had no savings or partnership in any store. He could have had no seven years' savings. Up to the time he came to Illinois, his earnings, and rightly so, belonged to his father. He worked for him, helping to build

a home for his father and mother near Salem, Ill. It was after this labor of affection was performed and he was past 21 years old that he began work in Offutt's store and there was no sheriff's notice of insolvency on the door. While employed in this store, he enlisted in the Black Hawk Indian war and was chosen captain of his company by the unanimous vote of his neighbors and fellow enlisted men.

Only One Partner.

Second, "PARTNERSHIP AFTER TWO YEARS *** FAILED AGAIN WITHIN TWO YEARS *** AFTER YEARS OF MISERABLE PENURY *** ON HIS THIRTY-NINTH BIRTHDAY HE PAID THE LAST DOLLAR FEB. 12, 1848."

William Berry was the only

partner he ever had while in any business other than the law. This partnership was formed within six months after he quit Offutt's store to enlist as a private to serve his country in the Black Hawk Indian war. This partnership continued but seven months, when he sold his interest to Berry, who ran the store for a few months only and closed out. While the partnership lasted some notes were given, which Berry assumed when Lincoln sold his interest to him.

At Berry's death, these notes not having been paid, Mr. Lincoln, with much inconvenience to himself, assumed payment, absolving the widow of any responsibility whatsoever. In after years, in clearing this assumed debt, he jocularly referred to it as the "national debt." Within three years thereafter he had purchased two residential lots in Springfield, Ill., and before he was 39 years old had bought a farm for his aging father and mother, where they both lived until they died.

He also had purchased a home for himself and family in Springfield. Not so bad for a young man on the frontier who was educating himself in the law and rearing a family, and meanwhile had served three terms in the Illinois Legislature and made a successful race for Congress.

Records Show Facts.

Third, "OFFER OF A JOB AS DEPUTY SURVEYOR . . . BUT HE NEVER TOOK THE JOB. . . DESTINY SEEMED TO HAVE SINGLED HIM OUT FOR FAILURE."

How untrue this statement is. He served as deputy surveyor from the fall of 1833 until he left New Salem in early 1837. That he was a surveyor of some ability is attested by the fact that as late as Jan. 6, 1849, he addressed a surveyors' convention in Chicago and presented a written expert opinion on an abuse engineering problem.

Fourth, "MOST CRUSHING BLOW OF HIS CAREER . . . FIRST AND ONLY ENDURING LOVE (ANN RUTLEDGE) SUDDENLY DIED. SAID HIS HEART FOLLOWED HER TO THE GRAVE. . . WENT DOWN TO THE VERGE OF INSANITY. . . SAID HE NEVER DARED TO CARRY A POCKET KNIFE. . . REMOVED TO PARENTS' HOME WHERE HE WAS NURSED BACK TO MENTAL HEALTH."

No one, who has really studied Lincoln's life, gives the Ann Rutledge story much credence. They think it mostly fiction. Nichol and Hay, who knew the surroundings better than anyone since, gave it only mere mention in their matchless work on Lincoln. Not a word about mental

sickness, so most writers think the story was fabricated by Herndon to hurt Mary Todd Lincoln. It is absurd on the face of it, as within a year after the episode, he proposed marriage to Mary Owen, a buxom Kentucky lady who was visiting in the community where Ann had lived. Remembering that the engagement ring he gave Mary Todd a few short years later bore within its golden circle "Love is eternal," we are inclined to think the Ann Rutledge love affair was but the fleeting fancy of a young couple much thrown together, Lincoln having lived in the Rutledge home for a few months.

Served in Legislature.

Fifth, "BELIEVING THAT THIS FAILURE MIGHT SUCCEED IN POLITICS . . . FRIENDS SECURED HIS SELECTION TO CONGRESS . . . AGAIN HE FAILED . . . CONSTITUENTS REFUSED TO RETURN HIM TO WASHINGTON."

It is remembered that before running for Congress he had served eight years in the state Legislature with marked distinction and became the head and leader of the Whig party in Illinois. He was a candidate for Congress on his own volition and declined to run for a second term because his term in Washington convinced him that he needed more self-training and he hid himself away in intensive study of higher mathematics to train his mind. His friends and neighbors indorsed his course in Congress

the next year, 1848, by again sending him to the Legislature.

Sixth, "FRIENDS . . . FORCED POLITICAL SITUATION WHICH PLACED HIM IN DIRECT LINE FOR NOMINATION TO UNITED STATES SENATE FORCED TO STEP ASIDE AND YIELD OFFICE."

Lincoln did lose the senatorship, but he stepped aside voluntarily to bring about harmony in the party and healed a factional fight that might have done great damage to the party. His party won the election; one of his good friends was chosen as senator.

Not a Misfit.

Seventh, "SERIES OF DEBATES . . . (DOUGLAS) GAVE NO QUARTER TO THIS MISFIT AND FAILURE . . . OVERWHELMINGLY DEFEATED."

The popular vote for the candidates for the Legislature favoring Lincoln was 5,000 more than the vote cast for those candidates favoring Douglas. Lincoln, by the popular vote, won the election. Though the Legislature voted 54 for Douglas to 46 for Lincoln, not

such an overwhelming victory for Douglas, the acknowledged leader of the Democratic party of the nation, and really was a victory for Lincoln as it for the first time brought his name to the American people as a national figure and stamped him as a nation-wide character, and paved the way for his success in 1860, when he became the first Republican President of the nation. We cannot account for the ignorance of the facts of the life of Lincoln, especially after his removal from Salem to Springfield. The merest novice should not make such glaring misstatements of facts in reference to his life and deeds.

Many Achievements.

Eighth, "HE HAD BEEN UNABLE TO ACHIEVE ONE SINGLE VICTORY IN 30 YEARS OF CONSTANT EFFORT."

It is hardly understandable that any one could have read the most unfavorable book on Lincoln and after reading such book could have made this statement. Here are only a few of his remarkable achievements of his unusual career. He was elected to the Legislature less than four years after coming to Illinois from Indiana and received all but a few votes in the precinct in which he lived, attesting to his popularity, not only in his own party but in his opponent's party. When less than 25 years of age he was Whig Floor Leader and the acknowledged leader of this party in the Legislature of Illinois.

At 31 he was a Whig presidential elector and cast his vote for William Henry Harrison for President. He was again presidential elector at large from his state and voted for Henry Clay and before he was 40 years old he was the lone Whig elected to Congress from Illinois. Surely honors like these, then and now, do not come to miserable failures. In 1849 he was offered and declined an appointment as secretary of the Territory of Oregon and a short time later could have had the much coveted appointment as Commissioner of the Land Office in the state of Washington.

Untiring Labor Won.

In 1854, just six years before being nominated and elected to the Legislature and in 1856 without being a candidate, and making no effort to get a single vote, in the first national convention held in Philadelphia, he received 110 votes for Vice-President on the first national ticket of the Republican party. Miserable failures have never in this country or elsewhere received so unusual and continued honors.

No, no, Lincoln, continued failures did not follow along your pathway from the cabin in Kentucky to the White House. They did not contribute to your success as the leading lawyer in your adopted state. It was only by your untiring labor in the forests of Indiana where you learned to read and did read every available book for miles around your cabin in the clearing with a determination to make the best of every situation in which you were placed with an ambition to excel in every task and a willingness to work that made it possible for you to achieve that greatness that has stamped you as a leader of mankind and endeared you to the people of the whole world. Long, long, after the Alexanders, Napoleons, Caesars and despots of their day and despots now, are but names, your praises will be sung and your carping critics will be not.

The DEBUNKER

By John Harvey Furbay, Ph.D.

**LINCOLN'S LIFE WAS NOT
A SERIES OF FAILURES.**



There have been numerous printed wall cards on "Lincoln's Failures," sometimes under the caption of "Discouraged?" These recite a long list of supposed defeats and failures of Lincoln. According to "Lincoln Lore," all of these statements are either untruthful or misleading. Lincoln was not a political failure when he ran for the Legislature in Illinois or for Congress. He was nearly nominated Vice-President without even knowing it; he was not outvoted by Douglas, and he was not the business failure he is usually described as having been. His life was a series of triumphs, not failures.

(Ledger Syndicate.)

2/5/42



KUPCINET

KUP'S COLUMN

ONCE AGAIN ABE LINCOLN is being maligned and today, instead of making our annual pilgrimage to his shrine, we should like to devote this space to setting the facts right. Ordinarily, on Lincoln's Birthday, we devote the column to an imaginary visit with Ol' Abe, during which we try to relate his undying dialog to the problems of today. But Reader's Digest chose on this 154th anniversary of Lincoln's birth to revive an old chestnut by **Arno B. Reincke**. The article, "He Could Take It," first appeared in 1939 and brought forth a tremendous howl of anguish from all Lincoln scholars. Now, reportedly because **Lowell Thomas** asked that the article be reprinted, Reader's Digest does so in its current issue.

"**HE COULD TAKE IT,**" is, as you might suspect, the story of a man who experienced failure after failure after failure, but never lost his determination. Finally, he was elected President of the United States. It's written in the finest tradition of "If at first you don't succeed, try, try again," the philosophy of our Cubs. We have no argument with the philosophy of perseverance, but as far as Abe Lincoln is concerned, the story of failure after failure isn't true. He had more than his share of success and there's no reason to gild the lily to prove his greatness.

REINCKE GETS OFF ON THE WRONG FOOT early in Lincoln's life by writing: "As a young man of 22, a partner in a store, he learned for the first time that failure is easier to achieve than success. It was a bitter lesson, punctuated with a sheriff's sign on the door and the realization that he had lost every penny of seven years' savings."

Fiddlesticks! Lincoln, at 22, was not a partner, merely a clerk in the store (**Offutt's**). And he had no seven years' savings to lose because until he was 21 all his earnings rightfully belonged to his father. There was no sheriff's sign on the door during Lincoln's period of employment there. He left Offutt's to enlist in the Black Hawk War and he was immediately elected captain of his company, hardly a sign of failure.

REINCKE TAKES LINCOLN through another bankruptcy, which caused him "many years of miserable penury, until on his 39th birthday he paid the last dollar of his obligation."

Again, there is exaggeration. **William Berry** was Lincoln's one and only partner in a store. Lincoln sold out to Berry after seven months. When Berry died, Lincoln assumed obligations for notes they had co-signed. But Lincoln didn't suffer "many years of miserable penury." Three years after Berry died, Lincoln purchased two house lots in Springfield, Ill., and, before he was 39, a farm for his parents and a house of his own in Springfield. He also made a successful race for Congress at this time, which further deflates Reincke's picture of Lincoln as a man with two left feet.



ABRAHAM LINCOLN

REINCKE NOW GIVES IT the ol' professor-hearts-and-flowers routine by reporting that Lincoln, after the second mercantile failure, was offered a job as a surveyor. "He was forced to borrow in order to buy a set of instruments and a horse, but he never took the job. One of his creditors levied on the instruments and horse and took them for debt."

A likely tale. But very unlikely in Lincoln's life. He did serve as deputy surveyor for Sangamon County from the fall of 1833 until about the time he left New Salem in 1837. As late as January 6, 1849, Lincoln, upon request of a surveyors' convention, presented an expert opinion on a technical surveying question.

OF ALL THE FIBS ABOUT LINCOLN, the supposed affair with **Ann Rutledge** is the one historians scoff at most. But not Reincke. He plunges right through the facts to say: "Life then dealt Lincoln the most crushing blow of his career—a blow to the heart from which his spirit never recovered. His first love suddenly died and, as he later said, his heart followed her to the grave. It was too much. He went down to the verge of insanity. 'At this period of my life I never dared to carry a pocketknife,' Lincoln is quoted as writing. Within a year he had broken so completely that he had to be removed to his parents' home 300 miles away and nursed back to mental health."

THE ABOVE IS THE ALL-TIME WHOPPER in Ol' Abe's life. The Ann Rutledge incident is ignored by historians as mostly fiction. And, in rapid order, there is no truth whatever to "his following her to the grave," the pocketknife story, the visit to his parents or his verging on insanity. About a year after Ann Rutledge's death, Lincoln proposed marriage to **Mary Owens**, who was visiting in the community. This conceivably could be the reason for the stories about Abe's sanity.

THE FLAMBOYANT EFFORT to depict Lincoln as a complete patsy until he became President is best typified in this passage from Reincke: "He had been unable to achieve one single personal victory in 30 years of constant effort."

THE ABOVE IS PISH-POSH of the worst kind. It is true Abe Lincoln rose to President in the face of great adversity. But he was far from the failure Reincke and others would paint him. For instance: He was elected to the Illinois Legislature at 25 years of age and re-elected at each biennial election for eight years. At 27, he was the floor leader in the Legislature. At 29, he was potential leader of the Whig Party in Illinois. At 39, he was the lone Whig congressman elected from the state of Illinois. In 1856, with no effort on his part, he received 110 votes for vice president in the first Republican National Convention. And you know what happened in 1860.

February 4, 1963

Editor
The Reader's Digest Association, Inc.
Pleasantville, New York

Dear Sir:

I was certainly surprised to read in the February, 1963, edition of the Reader's Digest the article on pages 140-142 by Arno B. Reincke entitled, "He Could Take It." In 1939, when this article was first printed in your magazine, it was branded as being based on legend and myth. Dr. Louis A. Warren, then the editor of Lincoln Lore, squelched the article with an array of facts. Likewise, a pamphlet by R. D. Packard was issued in reply to your article bearing the title "Was Lincoln a Failure at Fifty."

A great magazine like the Reader's Digest should strive to present facts because you do the American people a disservice everytime you perpetuate a myth or a fable. It would be so easy to have such Lincoln articles authenticated before you publish them in your magazine.

I am to a certain extent a professional lecturer. One of my speeches is entitled "Lincoln's So-Called Failures." In my speech I brand as spurious most of the so-called failures of Abraham Lincoln.

I would like to have your reaction to my comments.

Yours sincerely,

R. Gerald McMurtry

RCM:md
Enclosure: Lincoln Lore #521

cc: Lowell Thomas, New York, New York
Harold K. Sage, Normal, Illinois



THE READER'S DIGEST

PLEASANTVILLE • NEW YORK

March 11, 1963

Dear Mr. McMurtry:

Thank you for your informed comments on "He Could Take It" in the February Digest.

Unhappily, there seems to be more fable than fact in the Special Request Feature about Lincoln and we regret having perpetuated a myth in an honest attempt to show the value of perseverance. Inexplicably, the article did not go to our research department for the checking that regularly precedes the publication of material in The Reader's Digest and there was no record here of criticism following its earlier appearance in the magazine back in January 1939.

We appreciate the interest that prompted you to write.

Sincerely,

Mr. Cullers

Mr. R. Gerald McMurtry
Director
Lincoln National Life Foundation
Fort Wayne, Indiana

EDITORIAL OFFICE



Lincoln Lore

Bulletin of The Lincoln National Life Foundation . . . Dr. R. Gerald McMurtry, Editor
Published each month by The Lincoln National Life Insurance Company, Fort Wayne, Indiana

1502

FORT WAYNE, INDIANA

April, 1963

LINCOLN'S "SO-CALLED" FAILURES

Editors Note: In the February, 1963, issue of the *Reader's Digest* there appeared an article entitled "He Could Take It", by Arno B. Reincke. The publication of this article must have come as a great surprise to Lincoln students who had come to believe that the legends regarding Lincoln's "so-called" failures had been laid to rest.

The article was designated by the editors as a Special Request Feature with the following introduction: "Lowell Thomas, world-famous author, radio commentator, cinerama, television and motion-picture producer, has recommended that this article, which first appeared in the January 1939 issue of the *Reader's Digest*, be reprinted."

In 1939, when this article was first published, it was branded as purely legendary without any basis of fact. Dr. Louis A. Warren, then the editor of *Lincoln Lore*, published a criticism of the article in the weekly bulletin on April 3, 1939. The *Reader's Digest* article was also answered by R. D. Paekard in a pamphlet bearing the title "Was Lincoln A Failure At Fifty?" Apparently, none of these criticisms reached the editors of the *Reader's Digest*.

This past February a number of *Lincoln Lore* subscribers suggested to the editor that he take up the matter with the magazine editors. A letter dated February 4, 1963, was directed to the magazine's editorial staff, with a copy being sent to Lowell Thomas. On March 11, 1963, a letter was received from one of the editors stating that "there seems to be more fable than fact in the Special Request Feature about Lincoln." While no retraction of the article appeared in later issues of the magazine, the editors expressed "regret" for "having perpetuated a myth in an honest attempt to show the value of perseverance." The letter further stated that "Inexplicably, the article did not go to our research department for the checking that regularly precedes the publication of material in the *Reader's Digest* and there was no record here of criticism following its earlier appearance in the magazine back in January 1939."

Kupcinet, one of the nation's most popular columnists, under "Kup's Column" answered the *Reader's Digest* article in his syndicated column, which among other newspapers, appeared in the *Chicago Sun-Times* of February 12, 1963. Referring to the Reincke article Kupcinet took the magazine, the author, and Lowell Thomas to task for reviving "an old chestnut."

In order to review Warren's criticism of the Reincke article, published twenty-four years ago, *Lincoln Lore* Number 521 is being reprinted in this issue.

R. Gerald McMurtry

"He Could Take It"

The portrayal of Abraham Lincoln as a constant and miserable failure until "destiny with one magnificent stroke" swept him into the Presidency may sound a note of encouragement to a man who has never made any progress in life, but such a presentation of the Emancipator has no value as a historical treatise. Arno B. Reincke, author of the monograph, "He Could Take It", states that his argument is "based on fact," and in so affirming invites criticism of his sources.

This Lincoln failure story appeared as the leading article in the January issue of the *Reader's Digest*, and because of the wide circulation of the magazine through educational institutions just previous to Lincoln's birthday, it was widely used just at a time when it would have its greatest appeal.

The legendary aspect of the story which deals with "unseen forces" and "magnificent strokes of destiny" is supplemented by a strange philosophy that a long and continued series of failures culminates in success. Most students in a democratic country are invited to work out their own destiny, and the urge to excel when properly directed does not usually pay off in failures.

Those who have given some attention to the study of Lincoln's life, immediately upon reading the Reincke story, began to take exceptions to his characterization of the Emancipator. Through both correspondence and personal interviews the editor of *Lincoln Lore* has been

urged to make some written comment upon the eight specific statements around which the discussion evolves.

Limited space will make it necessary, first, to greatly abbreviate Mr. Reincke's eight specific statements about Mr. Lincoln, and second, to exclude from the comments by the editor of *Lincoln Lore* the many sources of proof which might be submitted. Sufficient to say that each comment has either a duly authorized record to sustain it or a preponderance of evidence to support it.

1. "A young man of twenty-two, a partner in a store . . . sheriff sign on the door . . . lost every penny of seven years savings."

Lincoln at twenty-two had no partnership interest in any store, and he had no seven years' savings to lose as all earnings up to the time he was twenty-one rightfully belonged to his father. He was serving as a clerk in Offut's store. He saw no sheriff's sign on the door, and while still employed by Offut he enlisted as a soldier in a Black Hawk war and was immediately elected captain of his company.

2. "Second partnership after two years . . . failed again within two years . . . after years of miserable penury . . . on his thirty-ninth birthday (February 12, 1848) paid last dollar."

William Berry was Lincoln's first and only partner in the store business and this relationship was formed five months after Lincoln served as clerk for Offut. The partnership lasted but seven months and Lincoln sold his interest to Berry in April 1833. Berry ran the store as sole proprietor until August, four months after he had bought out Lincoln. Certain notes signed by Lincoln and Berry caused Lincoln to become involved financially, and when Berry died Lincoln assumed Berry's obligations. Three years later, however, Lincoln bought two house lots in Springfield and, before he was thirty-nine years of age, he purchased a farm for his parents and a house of his own in Springfield. He also made a successful race for congress.

3. "Offer of job as surveyor . . . But he never took the job . . . Destiny seemed to have singled him out for failure."

Lincoln served as deputy-surveyor for Sangamon County from the fall of 1833 until about the time he left New Salem in the spring of 1837. As late as January 6, 1849 Lincoln, upon request of a surveyor's convention at Chicago, presented a written expert opinion on a technical surveying question.

4. "Most crushing blow of his career . . . First and only enduring love (Ann Rutledge) suddenly died . . . Said his heart followed her to the grave . . . went down to verge of insanity . . . said he never dared to carry . . . pocket-knife . . . removed to parents' home where he was nursed back to mental health."

The Ann Rutledge story has been ignored by historians as mostly fiction. There is no truth whatever about the grave stories, his insanity at this time, the pocket-knife story or his visit to his parents. About a year after Ann's death he proposed marriage to Mary Owen, who was visiting in the same community where Ann had lived.

5. "Believing that this 'failure' might succeed in poli-

tics . . . friends secured his selection to Congress . . . again he failed . . . constituents refused to return him to Washington."

Before running for Congress on his own initiative in 1846, he had served eight years in the Illinois legislature and was the leading Whig in the state. It was agreed before he was elected that he would serve but one term. His constituency endorsed him in 1854 by again electing him to the Illinois legislature.

6. "Friends . . . forced political situation which placed him in direct line for nomination to U. S. senate . . . Forced to step aside and yield office."

Lincoln did lose the senatorship but he stepped aside voluntarily for the sake of the party to bring about a unity of divided factions. His party won.

7. "Series of debates . . . (Douglas) gave no quarter to this misfit and failure . . . overwhelmingly defeated."

The popular vote for the candidates to the legislature favoring Lincoln was five thousand in excess of the vote polled by the candidates favoring Douglas. Lincoln by the popular vote won the debates. The legislature voted fifty-four to forty-six in favor of Douglas, not an overwhelming defeat for Lincoln.

8. "He had been unable to achieve one single personal victory in thirty years of constant effort."

It is difficult to account for such a statement as the above. He was elected to Illinois legislature at twenty-five years of age and to the same office at each biennial election for eight years, or as long as he chose to run. At twenty-seven years of age he was floor leader in the legislature, at twenty-nine years he was potential leader of the Whig party in Illinois. At thirty-one he was presidential elector for Harrison, at thirty-five elector at large for Clay, at thirty-nine the lone Whig congressman elected from the state of Illinois. In 1849 he declined a tentative appointment as Secretary of Oregon. In 1854 he was again elected to the legislature and in 1856 with no effort whatever on his part he received one hundred and ten votes in the first National Republican Convention as a nominee for the Vice-Presidency.

Congressman Abraham Lincoln Witnessed The Death-Stroke of John Quincy Adams February 21, 1848

(Continued from March 1963 issue)

In the letter already alluded to, dated June 1, 1848, Lincoln wrote the Reverend Henry Slicer pointing out that as he was not a member of the sub-committee of Arrangements "he had no knowledge of it whatever." Lincoln explained to the Chaplain that Mr. Charles Hudson, a Massachusetts Whig representative, and also a minister of the Universalist Church, was chairman of both the general and the sub-committees. Lincoln could not recall the names of the other members of Congress who served on the sub-committee.

Lincoln answered Slicer's queries as follows:

"To your first special interrogatory, to wit 'Were you consulted in regard to my exclusion from the services?' I answer, I was not—perhaps because the arrangements I have stated excluded me from consultation on all points.

"To the second, to wit: 'Was objection made to me—and if so, on what ground was it placed?' I answer I know nothing whatever on the point.

"To the third, to wit: 'Did my exclusion meet with your consent or approval?' I answer, I knew nothing of the matter, and, of course, did not consent to, or approve of it; and I may add, that I knew nothing which should have justified me in any attempt to put a mark of disapprobation upon you.

"So entirely ignorant was I, in relation to your having been excluded from the funeral services of Mr. Adams, that, until I received your letter, I should have given it as my recollection, that you did actually participate in those services."

The coffin of Mr. Adams was covered with black velvet

and ornamented with silver lace. The silver breastplate presented the following inscription:

John Quincy Adams
Born
An Inhabitant of Massachusetts, July 11, 1767
Died
A Citizen of the United States,
In the Capitol of Washington
February 23, 1848
Having Served his Country for Half a Century
and
Enjoyed its Highest Honors

On Saturday, February 26, 1848, the body of Adams was interred in the Congressional Burying Ground. However, the remains were deposited there only a few days, as the final interment was at Quincy, Massachusetts. Congressman John Wentworth was the Illinois Democratic delegate of the Committee of Thirty that accompanied the remains to Massachusetts. In Boston a committee of the Legislature of Massachusetts took charge of the ceremonies at Faneuil Hall and of the burial at Quincy, Massachusetts, Adams' home.

By a House resolution Adams' seat was to remain vacant for a period of thirty days. However, a political movement was not long in getting underway to elect Charles Frances Adams, the dead President's son, to the vacated seat. These political plans did not materialize and Horace Mann received the nomination and was subsequently elected.

A considerate gesture on the part of the Congress was a resolution passed by both houses granting "That all letters and packets carried to and from Louisa Catherine Adams, widow of the late John Quincy Adams, be conveyed free of postage during her natural life" (she died May 15, 1852).

One of the final Adams entries in *The Congressional Globe*, dated March 3, 1848, is the letter Mrs. Adams sent to the Speaker to be read (March 1, 1848) before the House of Representatives:

"Washington, February 29, 1848

Sir: The resolution in honor of my dear deceased husband, passed by the illustrious assembly over which you preside, and of which he at the moment of his death was a member, have been duly communicated to me.

Penetrated with grief at this distressing event of my life; mourning the loss of one who has been at once my example and my support through the trials of half a century, permit me nevertheless to express through you my deepest gratitude for the signal manner in which the public regard has been voluntarily manifested by your honorable body, and the consolation derived to me and mine from the reflection, that the unwearied efforts of an old public servant have not even in this world proved without their reward in the generous appreciation of them by his country.

With great respect, I remain, sir, your obedient servant,
Louisa Catherine Adams.

To the Honorable Robert C. Winthrop,
Speaker of the House of Representatives of the U.S."

On June 20, 1848, another resolution relating to the lamented Adams was brought before the House. "Resolved that the Committee on the Library of this House be authorized to procure a monument of Quincy granite, with suitable inscriptions to be erected in the Congressional burying grounds in memory of John Quincy Adams."

Perhaps the last resolution relating to the demise of Adams is dated March 3, 1949 when Mr. Ashmun presented a resolution that a bust of John Quincy Adams, by the artist John C. King, which had been procured by voluntary subscriptions, be placed in the Speaker's room "to mark the spot, and commemorate the circumstances of his death."

Thus, Abraham Lincoln while a member of the 30th Congress, witnessed the death stroke of one of the great men of our country and an outstanding figure in the diplomatic affairs of our nation.

(See *Lincoln Lore* No. 854, "Lincoln and John Quincy Adams" August 20, 1945).

Lincoln's "Failures"?

Below is one version of the so-called "Lincoln failures" list, shown in bold type. It's often used to inspire people to overcome life's difficulties with Lincoln as a model. Then look at the right column with other facts from Lincoln's pre-presidential life. History professor Lucas Morel compiled this comparison from the Chronology in *Selected Speeches and Writings/Lincoln* by Don E. Fehrenbacher, ed., 1992.

YEAR	FAILURES or SETBACKS	SUCCESES
1832	Lost job Defeated for state legislature	Elected company captain of Illinois militia in Black Hawk War
1833	Failed in business	Appointed postmaster of New Salem, Illinois Appointed deputy surveyor of Sangamon County
1834		Elected to Illinois state legislature
1835	Sweetheart died	
1836	Had nervous breakdown	Re-elected to Illinois state legislature (running first in his district) Received license to practice law in Illinois state courts
1837		Led Whig delegation in moving Illinois state capital from Vandalia to Springfield Became law partner of John T. Stuart
1838	Defeated for Speaker	Nominated for Illinois House Speaker by Whig caucus Re-elected to Illinois House (running first in his district) Served as Whig floor leader

1839		Chosen presidential elector by first Whig convention Admitted to practice law in U.S. Circuit Court
1840		Argues first case before Illinois Supreme Court Re-elected to Illinois state legislature
1841		Established new law practice with Stephen T. Logan
1842		Admitted to practice law in U.S. District Court
1843	Defeated for nomination for Congress	
1844		Established own law practice with William H. Herndon as junior partner
1846		Elected to Congress
1848	Lost renomination	(Chose not to run for Congress, abiding by rule of rotation among Whigs.)
1849	Rejected for land officer	Admitted to practice law in U.S. Supreme Court Declined appointment as secretary and then as governor of Oregon Territory
1854	Defeated for U.S. Senate	Elected to Illinois state legislature (but declined seat to run for U.S. Senate)
1856	Defeated for nomination for Vice President	
1858	Again defeated for U.S. Senate	
1860		Elected President

[Home](#) | [News](#) | [Educational Links](#) | [Places](#) | [Resources](#) | [Books](#) | [Speeches](#) | [Search](#) | [Mailbag](#)

Copyright 2002 by Abraham Lincoln Online. All rights reserved. [Privacy Policy](#)

